

Message Text

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ACTION HA-05

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FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
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INFO AMEMBASSY CANBERRA
AMCONSUL HONG KONG
USMISSION GENEVA
AMEMBASSY JAKARTA
AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR
AMEMBASSY MANILA
AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE

C O N F I D E N T I A L BANGKOK 21331

EO 11651: NA
TAGS: REF
SUBJ: UNHCR ASSESSMENT OF REFUGEE SITUATION IN MALAYSIA
REF KUALA LUMPUR 7526 (NOTAL)

1. SUMMARY: UNHCR HEADQUARTERS STAFFERS HOMANN-HERIMBERG AND HAN, AFTER DISCUSSIONS WITH MALAYSIAN OFFICIALS, DO NOT BELIEVE THAT THE REFUGEE SITUATION IN MALAYSIA IS ON THE POINT OF GRAVE DETERIORATION. WHILE THEY ACKNOWLEDGE THAT THE MALAYSIAN GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN STRAINED BY THE CONTINUING HIGH ARRIVAL RATE AND INCREASING CAMP POPULATION, THEY SAID THAT AT NO TIME DID ANY MALAYSIAN FEDERAL OFFICIAL MENTION A CEILING BEYOND WHICH MALAYSIA WOULD REFUSE TO ACCEPT INDOCHINESE REFUGEES. IN PART BECAUSE OF THIS ASSESSMENT OF THE MALAYSIAN SITUATION, THE UNHCR OFFICIALS ARE NOT KEEN ON MOVING FORWARD WITH THE PHILIPPINES TRANSIT CENTER AT THIS TIME. END SUMMARY.

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2. FRANZ HOMANN-HERIMBERG AND DARRYL HAN, IN DISCUSSIONS LAST WEEK IN MALAYSIA, CAME AWAY WITH THE VIEW THAT WHILE THE REFUGEE SITUATION IS SERIOUS IT IS NOT ON THE POINT OF EXPLODING. THE TWO UNHCR STAFFERS REPORTED THAT AT NO TIME DID THE MALAYSIANS MENTION A CEILING OR BROACH THE POSSIBILITY THAT REFUGEE BOATS WOULD BE DISCOURAGED FROM ENTERING MALAYSIAN WATERS. THEY ACKNOWLEDGED THAT

THIS VIEW OF FEDERAL OFFICIALS MAY NOT BE FULLY ACCEPTED BY STATE AUTHORITIES. FOR EXAMPLE, IN TRENGGANU WHERE THERE IS SERIOUS OVERCROWDING AT PULAU BESAR CAMP, LOCAL AUTHORITIES MAY FROM TIME TO TIME POINT REFUGEE BOATS SOUTH; THIS, THEY SAY, IS BEING DONE NOT TO DRIVE BOATS FROM MALAYSIAN WATERS, BUT TO PREVENT FURTHER OVERCROWDING AT PULAU BESAR. AS THE LATEST CONFIRMATION OF WHAT THEY SEE AS A CONTINUATION OF THE STATUS QUO, THE UNHCR STAFFERS POINT TO THE 400 REFUGEES WHO HAVE JUST BEEN PERMITTED TO LAND AT PULAU BESAR.

3. THIS ASSESSMENT OF THE MALAYSIAN SITUATION TENDS TO COLOR THE ATTITUDE OF THESE TWO UNHCR OFFICIALS TOWARD THE PROPOSED PHILIPPINES TRANSIT CENTER. THEY STATED THAT AT THIS STAGE MOVEMENT OF REFUGEES OUT OF MALAYSIA TO ANOTHER TRANSIT CENTER WOULD NOT ACCOMPLISH ANYTHING, AND MIGHT PROMPT THE THAI GOVERNMENT TO DEMAND SIMILAR TREATMENT FOR ITS BOAT REFUGEES. THEY ALSO RAISED OTHER OBJECTIONS TO THE PHILIPPINES TRANSIT CENTER CONCEPT, INCLUDING: (A) THEIR UNDERSTANDING THAT THE ASSURANCE SITUATION IN MALAYSIA FOR US APPROVED REFUGEES NOW HAS IMPROVED TO THE POINT WHERE A SIGNIFICANT REFUGEE DEPARTURE RATE FOR THE US CAN BE MAINTAINED; (B) THE DIFFICULTY OF MOVING TO THE PHILIPPINES REFUGEES WHO ARE NOT INS-APPROVED (IN TERMS OF THE NEED TO PROVIDE A GUARANTEE OF ONWARD RESETTLEMENT TO THE PHILIPPINE

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GOVERNMENT); AND (C) THE HIGH COST OF OPENING A TRANSIT CENTER IN THE PHILIPPINES.

4. THE UNHCR STAFFERS SAID THAT THE UNHCR WOULD REMAIN IN CONTACT WITH THE PHILIPPINES GOVERNMENT ON THIS MATTER, BUT GAVE THE CLEAR IMPRESSION THAT THE SUBJECT IS ON THE BACK BURNER. THEY DID NOT RESPOND TO A QUERY BY EMBASSY OFFICER AS TO WHAT THE LEAD TIME WOULD BE FOR IMPLEMENTING A TRANSIT CENTER IN THE PHILIPPINES. HOMANN-HERIMBERG AND HAN SUGGESTED THAT LOWMAN CONTACT UN DEPUTY HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES DE HAAN TO DISCUSS THE PHILIPPINES TRANSIT CENTER WHEN THE LATTER ARRIVES IN WASHINGTON IN AUGUST.

5. THE UNHCR STAFFERS MENTIONED THAT, AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE PHILIPPINES TRANSIT CENTER, THE UNHCR WOULD BE LOOKING INTO RAPID EXPANSION OF THE KUALA LUMPUR TRANSIT CENTER CAPACITY. THIS WOULD HELP RELIEVE SOME OF THE OVERCROWDING IN THE CAMPS. THEY ALSO MENTIONED THAT UNHCR WOULD BE STRENGTHENING ITS FIELD STAFF IN MALAYSIA.

6. COMMENT: HOMANN-HERIMBERG AND HAN REGRETTED THAT

THEY COULD NOT SHARE THEIR VIEWS WITH EMBASSY KUALA
LUMPUR BEFORE DEPARTURE. WE LISTENED TO THEIR ANALYSIS
AND NOTED THAT THEIR ASSESSMENT SEEMED TO BE MORE
OPTIMISTIC THAN THAT OF OTHER OBSERVERS. O'DONOHUE

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